

INTRODUCTION

Early in the twentieth century an American army officer wrote that the military post on the San Francisco headlands at the Golden Gate, the Presidio of San Francisco, possessed great beauty and probably no other military post in the world had such a magnificent location and commanding position. Even before then, the Presidio's history had been long and varied.

In 1776 Capt. Juan Agustin Bautista de Anza formally took possession of these headlands in the name of the king of Spain. During the winter of 1776-1777 Lt. Jose Joaquin Moraga oversaw the construction of a military camp in a sheltered vale inland from the headlands and named it the Presidio of San Francisco in honor of St. Francis of Assisi. The garrison's duties included guarding the nearby Mission Dolores and controlling the Indians of the area. Also, its commandant received instructions to regulate the coming and going of foreign ships, be they British, French, Russian, or American.

This coastal presidio marked the northernmost advance of Spain's American empire at a time of intense international rivalry among Western powers in the North Pacific. In 1793 Governor Jose Joaquin Arrillaga ordered the construction of a fortification, Castillo de San Joaquin, on the northernmost headland that had been named Punta del Cantil Blanco (White Cliff Point), which point Americans later named Fort Point, about a mile and a half from the Presidio. Priests christened and blessed the new work on December 8, 1794. The Spanish Viceroy considered its cost of more than 6,000 pesos to be quite a large sum.

In the years that followed, storms and earthquakes attacked the mostly adobe presidio and fort. The small garrison force and Indian laborers made repairs when funds became available. Ignored by the Spanish crown and the viceroy of New Spain, who had their own problems in Europe and in the Americas, the Presidio of San Francisco declined steadily after 1810 despite a spurt in repairs in 1815. With the collapse of Spain's colonial efforts in Mexico in 1821, officials in upper California, including those at the Presidio, changed their allegiance to the new Mexican government which, however, paid as little attention to the welfare of the northern colonies than had the viceroy. Then, in 1835, Commander Mariano Vallejo moved the garrison north to Sonoma, leaving a small caretaking detachment at the Presidio.

During the 1830s the village of Yerba Buena, on a cove east of the Presidio and later known as San Francisco, slowly grew in size. Its earliest inhabitants included Europeans, Americans, and Mexicans. In the 1840s the United States government became increasingly interested in acquiring upper California from Mexico. Anglo residents in the Mexican province, hearing rumors of war, became apprehensive. Then, in May 1846, the United States declared war on the Republic of Mexico.

Even before then, in March, Lt. John C. Fremont, U.S. Army, leading a military exploring party, entered California from the Oregon Country. American residents, with Fremont's encouragement, "captured" Governor Vallejo (who favored American annexation) in June and declared themselves a republic (Bear Flag Rebellion). Fremont then took command of the ragged force and marched toward the Presidio of San Francisco, where his party spiked the cannon in Castillo de San Joaquin. (The bronze gun *San Pedro* in front of the Officers' Club still had the Fremont party's spike in its touchhole in 1995.) About the same time Commodore John D. Sloat, U.S. Navy, captured the California capital of Monterey and officially raised the United States flag over California.

For nearly 150 years the United States Army maintained a garrison at the Presidio. In the beginning the number of soldiers remained small, especially when the California Gold Rush tempted the men to desert. Nevertheless, the army post in San Francisco Bay established a federal presence in the new territory during the period of military government and afterward. Officers surveyed the area and recommended boundaries for military reservations. From time to time the garrison marched out and attempted to settle differences between miner and Indian. A Spanish/Mexican adobe from the old regime evolved into an officers' club and remnants of the ancient structure still reside within the walls of the present building.

With the coming of the Civil War, the Presidio's strength exploded to more than 1,500 soldiers who manned the harbor defenses, marched east and south to quell secessionists, and assisted in maintaining order among the growing populations in the Bay Area. In the 1870s and beyond, Presidio troops played a role in the Indian wars in the West, suffering significant casualties in the Modoc War especially.

Beginning with the large masonry Fort Point in the 1860s, artillery troops manned the Presidio's and Fort Winfield Scott's coastal batteries through the Spanish American War, World War I, and a large array of weapons in World War II. Fort Scott also served as the headquarters for all the coastal defenses of the Bay Area, from Point Reyes in the north to San Luis Obispo Bay in the south.

Between 1847 and 1941, the Presidio's garrison included other combat troops in addition to the Coast Artillery Corps. Infantry, Cavalry, and Field Artillery trained and went forth to duty when called. During the Spanish-American War and the Philippine Insurrection, thousands of volunteers and regular troops mustered at the Presidio prior to going overseas. Cavalry troopers guarded the national parks in California. An infantry brigade, organized at the Presidio, guarded the troubled border with Mexico 1914-1916. Following the Panama-Pacific International Exposition of 1915 and World War I, Presidio's soldiers took part in the Siberian Expedition during the Russian Revolution to rescue a Czech army from the Bolsheviks. Beautification of the reservation became an important element in the planning of the 1880s and subsequent years, resulting in the forests and glens of the twentieth century that make the reservation a place of magnificent vistas and quiet charm.

For a decade in the 1870s-'80s, the Presidio served as the headquarters of the Military Division of the Pacific and the Department of California. For a short time following the 1906 Earthquake, at which time the Presidio assisted the city in its great disaster and provided camps for refugees, army headquarters returned to the post, their city offices having been destroyed. Then, in 1920, the Army's western headquarters returned to the Presidio permanently. During World War II, the Western Defense Command assumed responsibility for the defense of the West Coast. The Presidio now became the nerve center for army operations in the defense of the western United States including, for a time, Alaska. In 1941 the Fourth Army Intelligence School at the Presidio taught Japanese-American soldiers Japanese military terminology. Graduates of this school contributed significantly to American successes in Pacific battles. The school eventually grew into the nation's Defense Language Institute at Monterey, California. Following the war, Sixth U.S. Army, headquartered in the huge barracks on the main parade, assumed responsibility for the Army's operations in the western third of the United States and by the 1970s the western half of the United States.

The Presidio of San Francisco accommodated a variety of other missions over the years. Beginning with the Civil War, the Army established a cemetery west of the main post. In 1884 it became the San Francisco National Cemetery, containing the remains of the famous and the unknown, generals, admirals, privates, seamen, U.S. Marines, and soldiers reentered there from western Indian wars battlefields and the cemeteries of abandoned frontier army posts. In 1890 the Treasury Department established the Fort Point Life Saving Station in Lower Presidio. Its role became ever more important eventually becoming the sole

such station in the Bay Area until the U.S. Coast Guard replaced it with a new station at Fort Baker in Marin County in 1990.

Near the southwest corner of the Presidio's 1,440 acres stood the Marine Hospital. Moved there in 1875, it provided medical care for merchant seamen of all nations who were stranded on San Francisco's shores. The main building, constructed in 1932, provided such care until its closure in 1981. Beginning with the Spanish-American War, the Army's Letterman General Hospital, near the reservation's northeast corner, became one of the more important army medical institutions in the nation. In World War II it became the principal mainland hospital for the reception of all the wounded and sick from the Pacific Theater. In the last year of the war, 1945, no fewer than 72,000 patients passed through Letterman. Daily hospital trains carried them on to other destinations across the nation.

One of the more colorful tenants of the reservation, the fledgling Air Service of the U.S. Army, established Crissy Field in the Lower Presidio in 1921. This early army airfield undertook a variety of missions including assisting the Coast Artillery Corps in the training of its gun crews, publicizing the glamour of flying in those early years of flight, assisting in fighting forest fires in California, providing aerial photographs of West Coast cities and geographical features, and, most unusual, flying archeologists over the Southwest deserts while they recorded prehistoric irrigation systems and ancient transportation routes. Construction of the magnificent Golden Gate Bridge in the 1930s brought an end to Crissy Field, as well as impacting the Presidio in general.

The generations of Army Blue that passed through the Presidio's gates have given posterity a fascinating history of a strategic, important, and glorious old army post.